

hi-fi+

Issue 43
£4.50

www.hifiplus.com

REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS



Japanese Hi-end Special
WIN Limited Edition **B&W** Loudspeakers





Two Giants...

The Lyra Olympos SL and the Koetsu Coral Moving Coil Cartridges

by Richard S. Foster

None of you, so long as you have a pulse and a passing interest in analogue replay, will be unaware of, even unfamiliar with, those doyens of Japanese moving-coil manufacturing, Koetsu and Lyra. For those in the older generation, like yours truly, the name Koetsu is synonymous with the emergence and development of the hi-end, the first products we came across that redefined what was possible (and what it cost). Later, Lyra arrived in the vanguard of a new wave, the second generation of Japanese cartridge manufacturers who took lessons from Europe as well as their own heritage and promised even greater things – as well as better value. But as is so often the case, the output of the two schools has converged, until cartridge brands that once stood poles apart now have an astonishing degree in common. So it is with the Lyra Olympos and Koetsu Coral.

Both manufacturers offer extensive ranges of off-the-shelf designs, stretching from the almost affordable to the unconscionable when it comes to price. But even for products as exotic and rarified as these, there is another level – of exclusivity at least. Both these cartridges are available in extremely limited numbers, the Lyra only if you have a Parnassus to render up for parts as the magnets are no longer

available. Each is likely to require a considerable wait and an even more considerable cheque, but each is about as rare as hi-fi components get.

In fact, the similarities run deeper still, but it wasn't until RG landed me with this assignment that I'd even thought about comparing the two. It just seemed so uncouth, so unnecessary, because the thing these cartridges really have in common is the completeness of their musical vision. Yes, each has its own sound, but each is also the sound of music.

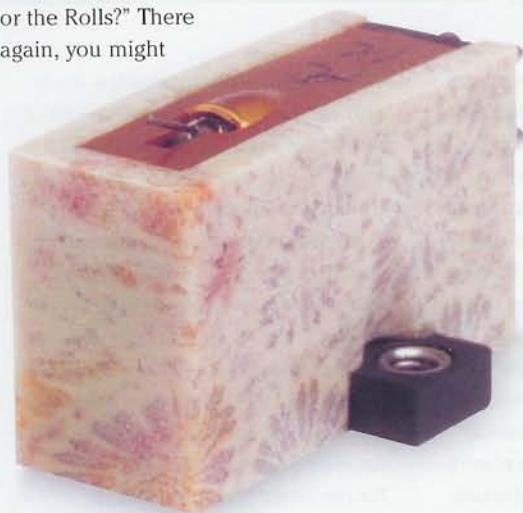
As far as Lyra are concerned, they view the Olympos and its lower output sibling, the SL, as a specialty model. Lyra simply states that their Titan "i" "...is the most technically exact phono cartridge transducer they can make." Allen Perkins, the U.S. importer for Lyra underlines that fact with the information that "The Olympos is priced at \$9800. It is available, but can only be made if we or the customer have an original Parnassus as a magnet donor. If you provide the original Parnassus, the price is \$7500. I don't think there is an extra charge for an SL version since they are all custom made anyway." You begin to get the picture. I was extremely fortunate in that Lyra not only sourced me a Parnassus, they turned my order around in a mere six-months (there have to be some compensations for the lousy pay and conditions that go with reviewing).

Those with a donor cartridge ready and waiting should think in terms of more like a year, so get in the queue early! The Olympos body is machined from solid titanium – just like the Titan, although the dimensions and specifics are slightly different. In many ways, the Olympos is rather like a Titan but with a more conventional magnet system (one magnet and two pole pieces). Having said that there's not much conventional about the super-exotic materials used; platinum for the magnet and chemically purified iron for the pole pieces. The Titan employs Lyra's avant-garde magnetic system; two magnets and no pole pieces.

Koetsu's Coral is another matter altogether. The company offers its generators in a range of different bodies across its various markets. Rather like the Olympos, the Coral is also not the Company's flagship offering (that's the even more expensive Blue Lace) but as soon as the brand's U.S. Importer, Ronnie Caplan, saw the understated beauty of the petrified coral bodies he knew he had to have them. So rare is the material that cartridges in this guise will only be available in the US, priced at \$15000 with production unlikely to exceed a couple of dozen. Yes, you can get the same internals built into a crystal body in the UK (called the Blue Onyx and costing £9098) but it won't be a Coral. Does that matter? ▶

► I have no idea, but bitter experience in a world where absolutely everything seems to matter suggests that it would be a minor miracle if it didn't. Certainly the Coral has fast become the cartridge of choice amongst the dedicated and insane that make up the band of US Koetsu aficionados.

So, what do you do if you're lucky enough to walk out to your dream driveway and the decision of the day is, "Do I take the Bentley or the Rolls?" There again, you might



take your Porsche Carrera GT, or maybe the Ferrari Superamerica F1. You begin to see the problem. Just what makes a great car, and will it be the same today as it is tomorrow? And if this car is great does it mean the other one isn't? At the end of the day, they're all great cars; very different, and great for different reasons, but all definitely great. That's exactly how I feel about these cartridges. Today I might want to drive the Koetsu but tomorrow it could be the Olympos... perhaps I'd better try and explain why.

Let's start with the Coral. Hardly a surprise to hear that the Koetsu errs on the warm side of neutral, although those brought up on those original, long-body designs will be shocked at the diet this cartridge has been on. Yes it's warm, but no way is it stodgy

or syrupy. Now it's as much a case of perspective as it is of balance, more mid-hall than middle-aged spread. Which also explains why the Coral manages to sound a little soft and rounded without being slow – at least not obviously so. Actually listen to the attack and dynamic impact of individual instruments and you quickly realize that things are definitely happening in real time – it's just that they don't stand out as

separate or exaggerated compared to events around them. Which is to do with overall coherence, and that's to do with the mid-hall perspective.



The beauty of the Row M seating position is that you get to hear the band as a whole. Let's talk stereo; the Coral throws a wide, deep and very tall soundstage, with great corner fill and no narrowing. Image scale is accurate regardless of depth within the soundstage, while dimensionality, especially at the front of the stage is exceptional. Instruments are realistic in terms of size and shape, presence and body; body too behind voices. Ah yes –

voices... If you want to showcase the Koetsu (and blow away your audio buddies) just reach for well recorded vocals. Take one of my favorites, the Cisco re-issue of Joan Baez's Farewell Angelina. This is an album I return to again and again. Baez is at the height of her vocal powers on this recording and her power and range are truly magnificent. While she's not to everyone's liking, there's no denying the purity of her tone. The first three cuts on side one are classic Bob Dylan compositions: the title track, 'Daddy, You Been On My Mind' and 'It's All Over Now, Baby Blue'.

With the Coral there's a stunning naturalness and presence to her singing, a sense of substance and stability to the image. It's just over there – really. But you'll need long arms to touch her because, of course, you're set well back. The

upside is no spitty sibilance or distracting, extraneous detail;

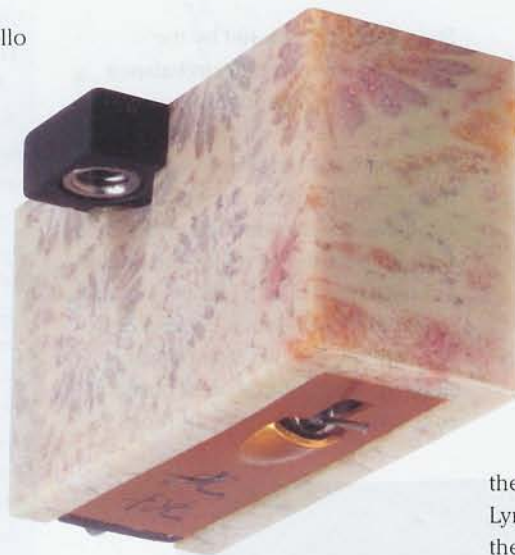
just Joan and the space around her adding its own natural warmth and sense of presence. You look into the acoustic and there she is.

One of my current Desert Island records, and RG can attest to the quality of both this recording and performance, is on the Swiss Gallo label: VDE 3019. It consists of Rachmaninoff's Sonata, Op. 19 for piano and violoncello as well as ►

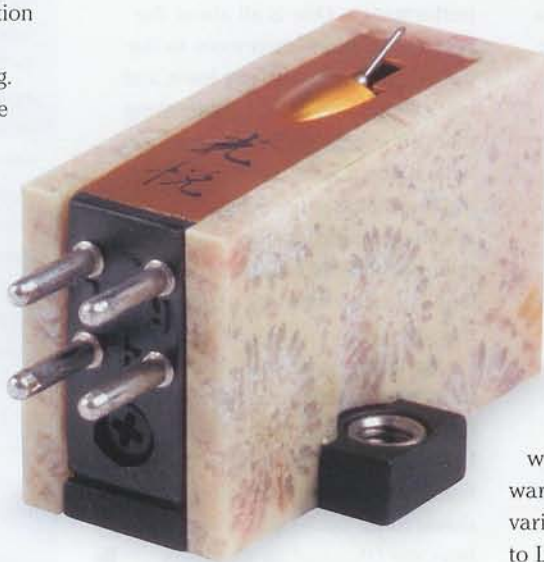
► Martinu's Sonata No. 1 for violoncello and piano. The performers are the great French violoncellist, Guy Fallot and his sister-in-law, Emmanuelle Lamasse on piano. (The record may be available through Juerg Schopper at Schopper, AG in Winterthur, Switzerland –

<http://www.schopper.ch> but hurry 'cos they only pressed 500!) Getting back to the music, with the Koetsu doing the tracking Fallot's 'cello is big and vibrant, with incredible richness and body. There's a majestic sweep to his playing, real space between him and the piano, itself, rich and solid behind. The power and energy of the instruments is never in doubt, their relative positions, one to another and within the acoustic.

Big, orchestral pieces hold no fears for the Coral which handles wide dynamic shifts with the same easy grace that it brings to individual players or more intimate recordings. The same stability, presence and body serves equally well in either context. Playing the Dorati Firebird on Mercury underlines the Koetsu's strengths in this respect absolutely perfectly. It thrives on the huge dynamics, delivering the sweeping orchestration with real power and substance; breathtaking, simply breathtaking. About a third of the way into side two, there is a section entitled, 'Infernal Dance of All Kastchei's Subjects' (we played this at the Manchester Show last year) that is nothing short of astonishing; definitely one of the finest four-plus minutes ever committed to vinyl. It's got incredible layered strings and woodwinds (when the instruments were truly made of wood), which build and build, adding brass



and gaining intensity until the shattering climax explodes with drums and percussion. So you've got the whole tonal palette on show, building dynamics that need to be fleshed out and supported, a quickening rhythm that needs to be driven (but doesn't need to get away from the cartridge, not with this much energy flying around) and the ability to rise to that final, big crescendo. The Koetsu paints with vivid colours, spatial and dynamic contrasts and compelling presence and drive. The orchestra is held stable, as is the acoustic.



The whole event is as good as orchestral music gets – shut your eyes and enjoy that Row M, centre section seat you just paid for.

Which is as good a time as any to switch to the Olympos. Anybody who has had experience with other Lyra cartridges might expect the Coral and the Olympos to be like oil and water, but in reality they're far more similar than that. Not surprising given the material parallels. Remember, Lyra themselves cite the Titan "i" as their most accurate cartridge and it's immediately apparent that the Olympos brings a warmer, more golden glow to proceedings. This is definitely the romantic member of the Lyra family – which kind of explains why they run it alongside the rest of the range.

Having said that, and warm as it is, the Olympos still possesses more than a hint of the traditional Lyra speed, attack and resolution. To go with the weight and presence that comes with the warmth, there's immediacy and directness in its music making, an inclusive transparency that puts you in the same space as the players. This is much more of a Row D seat (the Titan "i" would be a B) not exactly reach out and touch closeness to the performers, but there's no doubting that they're right there. It's a viewpoint that favours separation over dimensionality, inner detail over the acoustic boundaries, leading edges over the expanding, blended harmonics of a more distant perspective. So, there's warmth – and then there's warmth. The Olympos offers tonal warmth as opposed to the acoustic variety, Living Presence as opposed to Living Stereo. Which, given the ►

▶ seating position, is just right.

Likewise, the placement and spacing of notes is wonderfully precise, especially with piano. The closeness of the instrument robs it of a little weight and rich complexity, but the compensation comes in the shaping of phrases and the precision of the player's technique. Take the piano recordings of Jeanne Bovet, yet another Swiss rarity (at least there are two CDs available from www.vdegallo.ch).

Steinway was captured by the recording. It's this ability to balance both the musical and the sonic virtues that sets the Olympos apart.

This of course begs the question as to how these two great cartridges compare. It's easy enough to describe, but much harder to really understand. I can use the Fallot 'cello disc as an example: the Koetsu is big and rich and vibrant, the two instruments perfectly defined in their acoustic space; the Olympos reveals more



of the bowing, more of the

I will save extensive detail on Madame Bovet for another time, but she was a student of Cortot and a pianist of the highest order. She's now in her early 90's living in her native Switzerland. While she did tour extensively earlier in her life, she had really dedicated most of her career to teaching. However, in the 1970's she made several records in a series called, *Echos De Rompon*. The repertoire is rich and varied, from Bach and Scarlatti through Brahms, Schubert and so on. These were made for her friends and students and are extremely rare. More than any other cartridge, the Olympos conveys both her tremendous talent and flawless playing – but also how well her

energy and dynamism in the performance. One is all about the whole, the other leans more to the underlying structure. I say leans and that's what I mean. It's a subtle thing that gets exaggerated as soon as you write it down. Likewise the Firebird: the Koetsu has more substance and absolute weight, the Lyra more definite dynamic scaling and impact. One's about power, the other about excitement.

So far so good, you pay your money and take your choice. But there's a much subtler level to this. Let's go all the way back to the Joan Baez. No surprise that you get a shade more detail and intonation from the Olympos, or that she's ▶

Digits...

In numbers terms these two cartridges are surprisingly similar, despite the dramatic difference in their appearance. Both are low output: approximately 0.2mV (5.0cm/sec, zero to peak, 45 degrees) for the Olympos, with a slightly higher output for the Coral 0.2mV (3.54cm/sec, zero to peak, 45 degrees). Of course the Lyra is also available in a higher output, non-SL version, albeit at the cost of doubling up the windings. I loaded both cartridges at 47 kOhms – running them into the Herron VTPH1MC plus – as suggested by Lyra for the Olympos and Caplan for the Koetsu, however, your own preferences and system requirements will come into play here. I've adopted the US "norm"; in contrast RG will report in the next issue on his experiences with the cartridges loaded down to 200 Ohms (with his Groove Plus) or, in the case of the Kondo SF-Z transformer, between 1 and 40 Ohms. Internally, both designs rely on platinum magnets and both are distinctly on the heavy side, 13.8 grams for the Olympos, and 12.75 grams for the Coral. Both also use refined elliptical as opposed to micro-ridge stylus profiles (in common with the Kondo IO-J) with stylus life and overall musicality cited as reasons. Lyra refer to their profile as hyper-line contact while Koetsu have dubbed theirs Quadrahedron. Lyra employ a diamond coated, solid boron cantilever, the one on the Coral dispenses with the coating. But where they are different is with regard to vertical tracking force: The Olympos runs between 1.65 and 1.8 grams while Koetsu suggest 1.90 - 2.0 grams for the Coral. I track both at the lighter end of their respective scales.

Running both cartridges in VPI JMW 12.6 armwands made swapping back and forth a breeze – which in this instance proved to be a double-edged sword... as you'll see from the review. These are products that need to be understood and appreciated on their own merits, with reference only to music, rather than to each other.

placed that much closer. In direct comparison the Koetsu has a shade too much bloom but also more convincing body than the Lyra. Listen to either in isolation and you'd be happy, even ecstatic, with the results... Now listen to the guitar. The Olympos is undoubtedly crisper with greater attack, leading edge definition, more string and less body. But what type of strings is she using. With the Lyra you'd guess she's steel strung, with the Koetsu it

jazz, but it's the colour and textural complexity that's ever present. You simply forget about the cartridge, the cables and everything else in the system – you just hear the music.

The Olympos offers greater clarity, arguably greater insight (especially into an artist's technique) but occasionally, just occasionally you hear it working, you become aware of the system. It's clearer than the Koetsu but ultimately not as consistent. As to why this might be, I'm going to leave that particular hot coal to RG, who has thoughts on the subject, but the thing you need to grasp here is that the Olympos is much, much closer to the Koetsu in nature than it is to the Titan "i". It would be easy to conclude with some kind of continuum, Titan at one end, Koetsu at the other, Olympos hovering somewhere in the middle. That's not the case at all. Indeed, it's the similarities between the Olympos and the Coral that are far more

important than the differences. Perhaps I can enlighten you more by explaining that, when it comes to these two cartridges, it is hard to 'prefer' one over the other. It is easier to prefer one to the other. It does boil down to personal bias, preference and what particular balance of musical qualities is important to you. But in qualitative terms they share significant common ground, a way with music that some might even see as old-fashioned, especially in these days of high-resolution, ultra-definition audio. What these cartridges share is an uncanny ability to take detail and integrate it into a

coherent musical event. Or, to put it another way, the drama you experience in the musical performance (and these cartridges are nothing if not dramatic) comes from within the music itself, rather than from the performance of the cartridge. Where others high-light or exaggerate, these simply illuminate. You just need to decide which particular shade of lighting you prefer. ▶+



sounds more like she's using plastic. Which is it? I haven't a clue. But it reveals a fascinating (and just occasionally disturbing) difference between these two.

Much of the Koetsu's magic lies in its seductive power. There's a rightness, an immediately convincing quality to its presentation that draws you into the music. Admittedly, its qualities really shine with acoustic music, especially classical, and all things vocal. That might shift the emphasis sometimes, voice over guitar on rock, sax over trumpet on

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Lyra Olympos

£7500

\$9800

Prices assume customer supplies donor Parnassus body

Koetsu Coral

\$15000

Contacts:

Lyra Olympos and Olympos SL:

UK Distributor:

Symmetry

Tel. (44)(0)1727 865488

Net. www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

US Distributor:

Immedia

Tel. (1) 510 559 2050

Net: www.immediasound.com

The Koetsu Coral:

Audio by Meyer

Mr. Ronnie Caplan

Tel. (1) 904 613 6486

E-mail: ronniecaplan@bellsouth.net

Koetsu in the UK:

Absolute Sounds

Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909

Net. www.absolutesounds.com